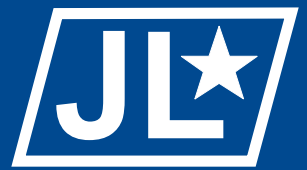


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Thinking About Logistics

Lieutenant Colonel James C. Rainey, USAF, Retired
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Defining Logistics

The word logistics entered the American lexicon little more than a century ago. Since that time, professional soldiers, military historians, and military theorists have had a great deal of difficulty agreeing on its precise definition.¹ Even today, the meaning of logistics can be somewhat *fuzzy* in spite of its frequent usage in official publications and lengthy definition in service and joint regulations. Historian Stanley Falk describes logistics on two levels. First, at the intermediate level:

Logistics is essentially moving, supplying, and maintaining military forces. It is basic to the ability of armies, fleets, and air forces to operate—indeed to exist. It involves men and materiel, transportation, quarters, depots, communications, evacuation and hospitalization, personnel replacement, service, and administration.

Second, at a higher level, logistics is:

...economics of warfare, including industrial mobilization; research and development; funding procurement; recruitment and training; testing; and in effect, practically everything related to military activities besides strategy and tactics.²

While there are certainly other definitions of logistics, Falk's encompassing definition and approach provides an ideal backdrop from which to examine and discuss logistics. Today, the term combat support is often used interchangeably with logistics.

The Themes of US Military Logistics

From a historical perspective, ten major themes stand out in modern US military logistics.³


- The tendency to neglect logistics in peacetime and expand hastily to respond to military situations or conflict.
- The increasing importance of logistics in terms of strategy and tactics. Since the turn of the century, logistical considerations increasingly have dominated both the formulation and execution of strategy and tactics.
- The growth in both complexity and scale of logistics in the 20th century. Rapid advances in technology and the speed and lethality associated with modern warfare have increased both the complexity and scale of logistics support.
- The need for cooperative logistics to support allied or coalition warfare. Virtually every war involving US forces

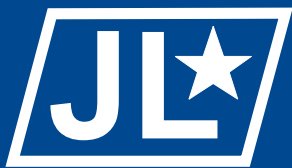
since World War I has involved providing or, in some cases, receiving logistics support from allies or coalition partners. In peacetime, there has been an increasing reliance on host-nation support and burden sharing.

- Increasing specialization in logistics. The demands of modern warfare have increased the level of specialization among support forces.
- The growing tooth-to-tail ratio and logistics footprint issues associated with modern warfare. Modern, complex, mechanized, and technologically sophisticated military forces, capable of operating in every conceivable worldwide environment, require that a significant portion, if not the majority of it, be dedicated to providing logistics support to a relatively small operational component. At odds with this is the need to reduce the logistics footprint in order to achieve the rapid project of military power.
- The increasing number of civilians needed to provide adequate logistics support to military forces. Two subthemes dominate this area: first, unlike the first half of the 20th century, less reliance on the use of uniformed military logistics personnel and, second, the increasing importance of civilians in senior management positions.
- The centralization of logistics planning functions and a parallel effort to increase efficiency by organizing along functional rather than commodity lines.
- The application of civilian business processes and just-in-time delivery principles, coupled with the elimination of large stocks of spares.
- Competitive sourcing and privatization initiatives that replace traditional military logistics support with support from the private business sector.

Notes

1. George C. Thorpe, *Pure Logistics*, Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 1987, xi.
2. Alan Gropman, ed, *The Big L: American Logistics in World War II*, Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 1997, xiii.
3. Charles R. Shrader, *U.S. Military Logistics, 1607-1991, A Research Guide*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1992, 9.

Mr Rainey is currently the Editor-in-Chief of the Air Force Journal of Logistics. He is a retired Air Force officer with more than 20 years of logistics experience. Ms Young is presently the editor of the Air Force Journal of Logistics. She has an extensive background in editing Air Force logistics manuals, particularly those used in the supply community. 



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